

The University of Chicago

THE INFLUENCE OF THE
RISING UNIVERSITIES UPON THE
INTERPRETATION OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1935

By
WILLIAM C. LAUBE

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CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

From Wiclif to the Modern Reader's Bible, from Erasmus to Tischendorf, Westcott, Hort and Von Soden, the men who have laid us under greater obligation for purer text, better translation and clearer understanding of the Bible, especially the New Testament, have been, almost without exception, men of the universities. In those auxiliary fields which are indispensable aids to interpretation the same has been the case, that is, in the fields of philology, both of classical and biblical, in the new methods of historical study, in archeology, comparative religion, anthropology, psychology, and in the immense fields of the new sciences we find almost all the great leaders in the universities, even as we found the leaders of Humanism and the Renaissance to have been largely university men as were also the leaders in the movements of Pietism and the Enlightenment in a later period. As to the matter of actual interpretation, so far as it is critical, scientific and objective, the authors of the leading commentaries are almost all university men.

This was only natural. In the free atmosphere of the university, in the eager cooperation with men in other fields, under the stimuli of scientific progress along all lines, interpretation also was fructified and enriched as it could not have been in schools solely devoted to theological study. In this progress men of many varied fields had their share, not merely theologians and biblical scholars, for in the realm of scientific knowledge there is no isolation but a wonderful interrelation and interaction.

Among the auxilliary fields philosophy occupies perhaps the chief place and has long been considered the ancilla theologiae. Whether in the role of maid or of mistress, theology always has need of philosophy and each should serve the cause of truth and seek the friendly cooperation of the other. We cannot imagine a history of cultural thought without philosophy, and we cannot imagine a Christian civilization without Christian theology. The interaction between these two disciplines has been keen, constant and, on the whole, constructive. The scope of our thesis permits no more than the mention of the great leaders in philosophy: Bacon, Des Cartes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Hobbes, Herbert of Cherbury, Berkeley, Leibnitz, Wolff, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Moses, Mendelssohn, and others, all of whom have left their influence in some measure upon theological thought and thus also on interpretation of the Scriptures. Or if we look into the realm of great spirits, not strictly philosophers, and yet with their outlook upon life strongly and pragmatically influencing human thought in large areas, we find the poets and the men of letters making contributions of unusual value. From Dante and Petrarch, to Milton, Goethe and Browning, the poets have been brothers to the prophets endowed with those insights without which religion remains cold and formal. And they made their contributions as they always do in the realm of the spiritual and ideal.

There were those other men of letters, not poets of first order, but men endowed with keen critical faculty, who made their contributions: Lessing, Herder, and Hamann in Germany; Coleridge, Jowett, Matthew Arnold and others in England; Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire and men of their type in France.

All these influences were intensified by the gradual acceptance of the great scientific discoveries: in the study of

the macrocosm (the universe at large), came men like Tycho de Brahe (1546-1601) and Copernicus and established the new theory of the solar system (1543); and Kepler with his laws of planetary motions (1619), followed by Galileo's experiments which confirmed the Copernican theory, added new laws in the realm of physics and astronomy. The microscope and the telescope, since about 1590, opened up undreamed of worlds both in the heavens above and the earth below, and the new discoveries in magnetism, galvanism and electricity, brought into the service of man forces more wonderful than those of the weirdest magic. And modern chemistry, of which Robert Boyle (1661) has been called the father, touched the common clay of earth and turned the hazy quest of the alchemists into one of the most fruitful and interesting fields of scientific research. And so we could go on, from Vasesius, the father of modern anatomy (1543), Harvey, who discovered the circulation of the blood (1616), Linnaeus (1707-1778), the founder of modern botany, to our own day, one grand story, in these various departments of human learning, of research and investigation, of discovery and progress.

And how were all these great advances received by the representative theologians? In a threefold way:

1. By bitter persecution as dangerous doctrines which were contrary to Scripture and subversive of the Christian religion. This persecution forms one of the dark chapters in the history of human progress.

2. By timid acceptance, first by the few bolder spirits, then by larger groups, last of all by the official Church. Thus the works of Copernicus on The Revolution of the Celestial Orbes, published in 1543, were not removed from the Index librorum

¹Frederick W. Farrar, History of Interpretation (London, 1886), p. 429.

prohibitorum of the Roman Catholic Church until 1822.

3. By inevitable acceptance, inevitable and thankless, grudgingly and with poor grace in many quarters, but accepted because of the irresistible power of scientific truth.

Nor did this resistance and opposition come from the theologians and religious leaders only. Men of science, educators and professional leaders, many of them in highest ranks, were equally opposed to the new theories as may be seen in any history of the various sciences. Geology, biology, anatomy, botany and all the rest had to fight their way on the path of progress as much as theology and scientific interpretation. But theology and interpretation shared in all of these, were modified, indirectly by them, and reflect not a little of their progress. That progress, indeed, seemed disturbing to many, it abolished not a few of the ancient tabus and totems, but it brought within the power of man unlimited forces and made contributions to civilization of which as yet the race has not proved itself intellectually and spiritually capable for their best use and enjoyment.

In this general movement the universities have had so large a share that we cannot imagine this scientific progress possible without their influence. The great leaders, almost without exception, were men of the universities. The indirect contribution of these movements to the question under consideration is probably far greater than the direct influence.

As we look for the direct influence of the universities upon the interpretation of the New Testament, we make some interesting discoveries. The oldest universities of Europe, those of Italy, drop out almost completely after the movements of Humanism and the Renaissance, for the reason, mostly, that the universities of Italy, as a rule, have no theological faculties, and the

education of the clergy, far below university standards, is carried on entirely in episcopal seminaries. Of Spain the same situation holds true, hence we look in vain for great leaders in our field aside from some of those mentioned in connection with Bible translations and special editions, and some prominent teachers of biblical languages.

As to France, Paris had indeed been the true Alma Mater of Europe. In her palmy days she is said to have attracted as high as twenty thousand to thirty thousand students from all parts.¹ She was considered the supreme authority in theology, and a decision from the Sorbonne was final. But when at the crossroads of civilization she turned her back upon the new movement and submitted to the dominance of the Jesuits, she lost her great prestige. Her light as a leader of religious thought became dim and her contribution to theological progress remained small. Paris had always been the outstanding university of France, and the provincial universities never rose to positions of great influence. With the great political changes under the first Napoleon they became mere "special schools," Paris, however, was so utterly reorganized that Döllinger can say: "The French university has now nothing in common with the German universities but the name."²

The old universities of Vienna and of Prague suffered for centuries under repressive and reactionary measures and lacked that academic freedom so essential to progress. Copenhagen and Uppsala, on the other hand, owing to various limitations, not the least that of language, always depended largely on Germany. Such contributions as have been made to our field have been dealt with

¹Johann Ignatius Döllinger, Die Universitäten Einst und Jetzt (London, 1894), p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 8.

by Carl Gustav Carlfelt of this department.¹

As to Oxford and Cambridge Döllinger, who speaks from personal observation, says: "I shall describe them as continuations of the public schools (Gymnasien) combined with clerical colleges and the study of theology."²

Free and independent research in the field of biblical learning has not been a characteristic of English universities, and for this and other reasons, as has been shown before, their contribution in our field is not in keeping with what we might expect from schools at once so ancient, honorable, and of such great importance to their country.

The four Scotch universities, St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh, do not measure up, in general, to Oxford and Cambridge, and their merits in our field has largely been by way of translation and popularization. Many works of German theological scholars have been given to the English speaking world through Scotch translators.

Checking up more in detail on the influence of the various universities during the different periods under consideration we have the following result:

1. In the Pre-Reformation period the universities which were the scene of study and teaching of the great men that prepared the way for the Reformation principally were Paris, Heidelberg, Erfurt, Prague, Oxford, Tübingen and Basel. Bologna had some indirect influence, Cambridge and Leipzig had a small share, Erfurt probably would deserve first place in influence for the ner movement.

¹ Carl Gustav Carlfelt, "A History of Scientific Research in the New Testament by Swedish Scholars," Unpublished Doctor's thesis, Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1934.

² Döllinger, op. cit., p. 25.

2. In the Reformation period, that is from roughly 1517-1580, the beginning of the Reformation to the adoption of the Formula Concordiae, the universities, as centres of Reformation influence and activity, would rank, approximately as follows: Wittenberg, Heidelberg, Erfurt, Tübingen, Basel, Geneva, Strassburg, Cambridge, Oxford, Paris, with the rest scattered. The Italian universities do not share in the movement and definitely drop out from this period. Some of the German universities: Cologne, Freiburg, Ingolstadt, are inhospitable to it and soon become hostile and the seats of counter-movements; Leipzig holds a rather indifferent place, Rostock and Greifswald only a very minor one, Marburg begins to emerge as a center of influence.

3. During the Post-Reformation period we still find Wittenberg, Erfurt and Basel holding a high place, with Geneva still influential and Strassburg still important. Jena, Giessen, Königsberg, Berne and Kiel are just arising. The confessional universities are engaged in doctrinal controversies.

4. In the period of the Enlightenment we find great activity in the new universities, especially Halle, which now takes a place of leadership followed by Göttingen and Erlangen. Tübingen comes into greater prominence again, Giessen attracts attention, Leipzig has some strong men, Wittenberg and Heidelberg are less prominent.

5. In the Modern period, beginning roughly with the nineteenth century, we find a new situation: Erfurt, Wittenberg, Geneva, and some smaller schools have dropped out entirely, new schools have arisen, principally and above all, Berlin, but also Bonn. Throughout the nineteenth century Berlin commands a position of greatest influence, with Tübingen second, while Leipzig, through its great textual critics -- Tischendorf, Gebhardt,

Gregory -- and through other able men, gains a position of influence far beyond that in the past. Heidelberg also is important as are Halle and Marburg, at least at times. The other universities lay claim to a great man here and there in the field of interpretation, but the centres of real influence are the universities first named. In this period we again see the universities of Oxford and Cambridge take a high place through men like Dean Alford, Grenfell, Hunt, Westcott, Hort, J. Rendel Harris and others, especially in the field of textual criticism and papyrology, both of which are of great importance to the proper interpretation of the New Testament.

When we consider that Gottlob Wilhelm Meyer presents the history of interpretation from the beginning of the revival of learning to the beginning of the nineteenth century in five volumes, and that J. G. Rosenmüller in his Latin history of interpretation also requires five volumes, we will not expect an exhaustive and final presentation on this subject in the framework of this thesis. But our investigations have shown conclusively that the rise of the universities was of the greatest influence toward a critical, scientific and adequate interpretation of the New Testament, and the Scriptures in general, and that this influence was greatest where unhampered freedom from political and ecclesiastical restrictions permitted independent scholarly research.

Allegory, Scholasticism, tradition, dogma, Pietism, Rationalism -- all had their day, and each in turn succumbed to the change of intellectual climate. None of these methods proved itself adequate to the task of sound interpretation.

With the coming of the grammatico-historical method, reinforced by the socio-historical approach, a method of interpre-

tion has at last been developed which may well lay claim to scientific character and to the esteem of unbiased scholarship. Rightly used, this method will lead us into a truer understanding of the New Testament writings than any of the former attempts. To the men of the universities belongs the credit of having developed a method of interpretation which lifts the teachings of the New Testament out of the bounds of tradition and dogma into the realm of free investigation and objective reality. Without the influence of the universities this progress would seem to have been impossible.

